

Creating Alter-Nation through De-territorialization in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

Musrat Alam¹

Abstract

This paper will explore the concept of de-territorialization and its contribution to the re-imagining of the borderline concept of a nation into an alter-nation in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). In a post-WWII British context, Britain's territorial space opened up as an opportunity for the influx of migrants even as it grappled with changes in policy-making, including the British Nationality Act of 1948. It allowed the migrants to frequently challenge the unity of Englishness against the backdrop of multiculturalism. Selvon's work focuses on the lives and the newly found ways of Caribbean migrants to adapt to post-WWII Britain. This paper will explore how de-territorialization as an idea prompted the English to reconceptualize a nation as an alter-nation in Selvon's novel.

Keywords: Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, de-territorialization, alter-nation, post-WWII Britain

Introduction

The concept of de-territorialization forces us to re-think what it means by a nation within one single boundary line. The concept itself allows us to think of the fluid structure of a nation that can be diverse in its multicultural dimensions. In the post-WWII British context, Britain was forced to reconsider its policies of defining nationhood through three Nationality Acts and later through the Immigration Acts. After the Act of Nationality in 1948, England was compelled "to learn to tolerate a greater diversity which manifests itself in greater multiculturalism and polyethnicity" (Pichler, 2004, p. 44). Thus, the influx of immigrants in 1950s London challenged and reshaped the image of Britain as a nation into an "ambiguous and ambivalent construct... of cultural representations, a discourse which creates... and influences our behavior towards and perceptions of others and ourselves" (Selvon, 1956, p. 45). This process of de-territorializing Britain as a nation allows the immigrants to question and challenge the borderline definition of a nation into an alter-nation with their fluid immigrant culture and lifestyle in post-war England.

As Baucom explores the shape and history of Englishness in his 1999 book *Out of Place*, he finds out that "England's cities are certainly places in which the nation's cultural identity continues to be refashioned... [and] by which the alter-nation's urban migrants, among others, have written the text of England's newness" (p. 191). Following his theoretical premises of de-territorialization and alter-nation, this paper will explore migrants' lives as they are presented in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). The concept of altering the borderline definition of a nation will be discussed concerning how an alter-nation is built upon by challenging the ongoing process of Englishness through the culture and lifestyle of the Caribbean migrants in London.

¹ Adjunct Lecturer, Department of English, Canadian University of Bangladesh

As much as the discussions on de-territorialization and nation-making are central to identify to this paper, it is equally important to take note of the author, Selvon's life in post-WWII England as biographically essential elements in the pieces he wrote. A Trinidad-born writer was already an adult when he moved to England in 1950. Introduced to the hotchpotch and clashes of cultures and nations, his perception of England and London as a mixture of everything is quite vivid in his works. Most of his writings such as *Calypso in London* (1957), and *Moses Ascending* (1975), and *Moses Migrating* (1983) express the hybridity of London and the alternations of English ways of life through the migrants' practice of Creolised languages and cultures. Dyer (2002) in her article "Immigration, Postwar London, and the Politics of Everyday Life in Sam Selvon's Fiction" quotes, "More than anything else, my life in London taught me about the people from the Caribbean... I was discovering a pride, a national pride, in being what I am, that I never felt at home. That was one of the things that immigration meant to me" (p. 114). It is also to be noted that other Caribbean-born writers such as George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul, who also arrived in England in the 1950's, had critically appreciated Selvon's works, making him one of the pioneers in Caribbean and diasporic writings of his time, as Dyer further notes in her article.

The British Nationality Act, 1948: "To Belong"

The Lonely Londoners (1956) grapples with the significance of ships bringing in immigrants for work, for a better life, and above all, for a sense of rightful belonging. These ships, deployed by Britain's government for its economic betterment, carried not only immigrants' hopes and dreams but also represented and acted as the carrier of immigrant cultures for the English lifestyle. Baucom (1999) refers to this invasion of West-Indian culture within the peaceful traditional culture of Englishness where "a perfect amphetamine, the affect-event offers to trip its consumer into narcotic spaces of a radically de-territorialized newness, to liberate us into the intensity of meaninglessness, to send us on a vacation to the isle of the lotus-eaters" (p. 194). Even though the British government gave the permission and right to these immigrants coming to Britain to live and work for their personal purposes, they "don't like the boys coming to England to work and live" (Selvon, 1956, p. 36). This influx of races threatened that "Englishness" which would be blurred in a context of 'alienation and insecurity' (Pichler, 2004, p. 47). It is not just the black immigrant's question of belonging to this alter-native space; it is also an integral question for the characters in Selvon's work.

In the novel, Bartholomew (Bart), one of Moses's Trinidadian friends questions his sense of belonging "neither here, not there, though he more here than there" (Selvon, 1956, p. 58) and shows his sufferings and his wish to belong in the island of lotus-eaters. The concept of 'arrival' is one of the key elements for emigrants in diasporic contexts. It can link questions of citizenship, rights, and nationality for the migrants in their adopted country. Rushdie, too, in his 1991 book *Imaginary Homelands* talks about the "trope of arrival...results in migration in literal terms- across national frontiers and from rural to city; and beyond the literal migration of ideas into images and from old selves into new ones", as states Nandan (2008, p. 75) in "V.S. Naipaul: A Diasporic Vision". When the British government extended citizenship for migrants through the 1948 Nationality Act, a large number of migrants immigrated to Britain, lured by reports of the higher standard of living in Britain. Immigrants, along with their hopes of living in the UK were now rightfully authorized by the British government although their 'arrival' in Britain would ultimately generate the idea of creating an alter-nation through their own native lifestyles.

From the very beginning of the novel, we see Moses emphasizing how more and more West Indians keep migrating to London to create better opportunities for themselves. Moses further asserts his right to be a British citizen by saying, “the Pole who have the restaurant he ain’t have no more right in this country than we” (Selvon, 1956, p. 37). This statement shows how Moses considers himself as a British citizen with lawful rights. On an interesting note of ‘othering’ migrants from different nationalities, he points out that the Polish are the ones who are foreigners living in Britain, and certainly not the West Indians. Therefore, the context of the ‘outsiders’ arrival’ in Britain for Moses and other characters in the novel not only implies an essential de-territorialization but also introduces the readers to re-territorialization as an unavoidable outcome of the former. With verified citizenships offered by the British government, they develop an alternative take on what it means ‘to belong’ through their distinctive realization of an alter-nation and claim their territorial right to exist.

Creating an Alter-Nation

To understand the idea behind an ‘alter-nation’, one must question the concerns behind a ‘nation’ and its ‘subjects’. Historically speaking, ‘Englishness’—or a distinctive set of colonial expressions in the form of British nationality—was attacked due to the events brought forth by the “Windrush generation”, a principal concern behind the (re)making of an alter-nation. Hewitt and Issac (2018) in their article titled “Windrush: The Perfect Storm” discuss that “Windrush Generation is a reference derived from the vessel, *HMS Windrush*, which brought hundreds of West Indians to the UK, at the behest of the British Government, to rebuild Britain after the Second World War” (p. 294). For far too long, the concept behind ‘Englishness’ has drawn its breath from its empirical power and ownership of landscapes extended to colonized subjects. Even after documented decolonization and WWII, the binary practice of ‘black and white’ existed strongly “between post-colonial subjects and native Britons” as Dawson (2007, p. 29) discusses in her book *Mongrel Nation*.

Thus, in a post-WWII Britain, the Windrush generation was trying to claim their own space and they still considered Britain to be their ‘mother country’ by holding a British passport. But, viewed from the perspectives of British law and the quintessential sense of ‘Britishness’, they are nothing more than neo colonial subjects. Nevertheless, the homogeneous space of Britishness had to “adjust” to the idea of coming in contact and accepting a changing nation “that would allow the key aspects of British identity and influence to be preserved, albeit in a slightly diminished form” (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2019, p. 26). As post-WWII Britain was trying to preserve its “racial purity and consequently...nationality” (Dawson, 2007, p. 29), the migrants were creating alternate identities amid a homogenous Britain. Hence, the transformation of the metropolitan English culture is now combined with immigrant cultures which challenge the role of Englishness built on generational history.

In the novel, we see Tolroy plans to bring his mother to England to support their whole family in Jamaica. However, his mother brings their entire family instead, Tolroy panics and blames his mother for bringing the family to England. His mother defends their family values, traditions, and instincts behind bringing their Jamaican culture into this English space, thereby putting a question mark on Englishness. This scenario can be seen from Baucom’s (1999) perspective on Thompson’s view of “ordering disorderliness” (p. 196), where the “English crowd, acts to protect a customary body of rights that its members believe to be threatened, customary rights that, crucially typically enshrine local ways of being, organizing the social, the political and the economic” (p. 196). This brings the question of migrants’ emplacement and their belongingness one step closer to threatening and ‘disturbing’

peaceful English lifestyle in their localities. This desire for belongingness comes not only from the desire to achieve their individualistic dreams of a better lifestyle in the English space but also dates back to the history of WWII when these West Indians, now renamed as migrants, fought side by side for Britain itself. It explains why they believe that they have rights. Therefore, Moses says in the novel that “We is British subjects... we have more rights than any people from the damn continent to live and work in this country and enjoy what this country have, because is we who bleed to make this country prosperous” (Selvon, 1956, p. 37). What Moses says reflects their desire to be recognized for their contribution to the (re)building of Great Britain by creating an alter-nation of themselves out of a sheer desire to belong. As Baucom says, this permanence comes from the “desire to rest, to belong” (p. 202). Thus, the peaceful tradition of Englishness is invaded by immigrants such as Tolroy and his families. Their desire for an alter-nation effectively manifests in their seeking of permanent residency in Britain.

Question of Multiculturalism

Selvon begins the novel with the ‘arrival’ of immigrants to Britain and shows how these people gradually create their own space and context of alter-nation through the inclusion of their culture within British culture and traditions. For example, the practice of calypso music is a large part of Jamaican, Trinidadian, Barbados, and Antiguan cultures. Calypso music goes back to the colonial era (especially in Creolized areas) when it was used as a form of resistance against the dominance of the British Empire. Dawson (2007) in her article notes: “After World War II, calypso music became one of the dominant forms of popular culture on a global scale, fostering pan-Caribbean exchanges, rejuvenating the recording industry in both the United States and Britain, and catalyzing the growth of Hi-Life music in colonial West Africa” (p. 31). In the novel, when Tanty wants to dance with Harris, she says: “Tell this girl to unlace you...these English girls don’t know how to dance calypso, man” (Selvon, 1956, p. 111). Through these words, Tanty is commenting on the sentiment of the West-Indian traditions that can never be truly understood by the English people as they can. Even though the British plea to use calypso music in their cultural functions, the emotional and historical attachment to it in the English space makes us understand that these immigrants are trying to create alternate modes of self-expression through these West-Indian cultural elements in their lifestyle here. Baucom (1999), elaborating on Piere Nora’s point on the same, talks about how Nora creates a link between history and memory in specific environments and places. Baucom further says: “History and memory are fundamentally opposed to one another, and that we inhabit a moment in which history has so nearly triumphed over memory that remembrance can survive only as a sort of bureaucratic imperative” (p. 18). In the novel, Tanty’s forceful sentiment toward Calypso is related to her West-Indian history, and her memory can only be retrieved in Britain via an emerging hope of building an alter-nation. This is how Calypso music, an important element of the West-Indian culture has been adopted by the British and has become a part of the common narrative of British lives.

Discourse of Power

The articulation of power has taken different shapes and showcased different contexts within the arena of literature over the years. In Selvon’s 1956 novel, the notion of power is portrayed in a subtle manner where the desire to grasp power is linked to a race and a sense of belonging to a nation. The practice of demonstrating power in interracial relationships is portrayed through the male immigrants’ conquest of white women in particular. The need and desire to conquer white women with their charms show that they only want to get a sense of belonging to the British nation as their

alternative context of a nation. Dawson (2007) reports, “By gaining mastery over white women, Selvon’s characters strive to overcome the forms of racist denigration they experience in everyday life in the metropolis. These conquests are necessarily marked by ambivalence and anxiety” (p. 48).

For example, in the novel we see the character of a Nigerian man named Captain, and his love for white women is very much emphasized as a part of his life spent in British space. His desire to do anything to spend time with a white woman is an articulation of his lust for power and desire to conquer the white colonizers. We see how Cap’ would even prefer being with a white woman rather than holding onto any job and confesses that “he love [white] woman too bad” (Selvon, 1956, p. 46). Another example of acquiring white power to build an alter-nation is through Bart’s “thirst for [white] woman” (Selvon, p. 61). In the novel we see Bart’s love for Beatrice and how he wants to hold on to the idea of Englishness in his relationship with her. Ultimately, Bart fails since Beatrice’s father would never allow having “curly-haired children in the family” (Selvon, p. 62). In the novel, Moses talks to Galahad about how people like Galahad do not understand the discourse of this context of alter-nation and stay happy only with the idea of acquiring white women only to get a sense of power over the white race. Moses says, “[it] is no use talking to fellars like you. You hit two-three white women and like you gone mad” (Selvon, p. 127). Galahad’s observation of white girls in summer and comments on their physical appearances are also examples of how these immigrants’ desire to acquire white women is an articulation of achieving power and having a sense of belonging to this alternative nation as opposed to their homelands of Trinidad and Jamaica. Their encounters and engagement with these white women reveal Dawson’s notion of ambivalence and anxiety of creating a connection between ‘home’, that is to say, West Indies, and the adopted alter-nation Britain. The discourse of power is also seen through the use of ‘broken Englishes’ in the novel. Language, which was used as a strategic tool to control and apply power over the colonizers, is now seen being practiced in the ambivalent English space.

In the novel, we see that Galahad regrets and questions his skin colour after being engaged in a conversation with an English child and her mother. He asks the child her name “putting on the old English accent” (Selvon, 1956, p. 83) but the mother instantly removes the child away from the situation. Galahad asks God: “What it is we people do in this world that we have to suffer so?... Colour, is you that causing all this, you know... Why the hell you can’t change colour?” (Selvon, pp. 83-84). Racial discrimination and language still work as tools to discriminate against immigrants in an English space. Thus, it shows that to build this context of alter-nation these immigrants still have to overcome the racial denigration on display in post-colonial Britain.

Working Class Conditions in Post-WWII Britain

The 1948 Nationality Act not only extended the number of migrants’ emplacement in Britain, it also created a large working-class among the whites in Britain. Again, the promise of equal rights as a British citizen resulted in the influx of migrants coming to British space. Even after coming to England, their reception did not match with their high idea of the ‘mother country’. The livelihoods of these working-class migrants reveal that through many hardships they tried to attain a sense of belonging in this context of alter-nation. In the novel, there is a long description of the living conditions of Tolroy along with other migrant working-class people in a British space. Their struggle shows that “this is the real world, where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday comes” (Selvon, 1956, p. 70). In post-WWII Britain, the housing shortages and poor maintenance of the houses served

as homes for the working class. Britain, unable to cope with the number of migrants, very carefully crafted this gap that favored their own agendas of industrial boom.

Regardless of these migrant's struggles, the negotiation of what it means for one to 'belong' in this alter-nation comes through such determination and instances of resistance. Even streets are portrayed as divided between the working class and the rich white people of England: "them rich people who does live in Belgravia and Knightsbridge and up in Hampstead and them other plush places, they would never believe what it likes in a grim place like Harrow Road or Notting Hill" (Selvon, 1956, p. 70). Ultimately, it results in the ignorance of the rich white class people about the lifestyle and hardships of these migrants who have been invited to get legal citizenship to Great Britain. As Galahad contemplates,

Them people who have car, who going to theatre and ballet in the West End, who attending the premiere with the royal family, they don't know nothing about hustling two pound of brussel sprout and half-pound potato, or queuing up for fish and chips in the smog." (Selvon, pp. 70-71)

His comments not only show the struggle of these working-class migrant people but also convey the post-WWII sentiments of Britain and the way the English have forgotten the contribution of these migrants during wartime. Vickers (2009) in her article titled "'The Blessed Plots': Negotiating Britishness in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*" differentiates between the urban locations of London and West-Indian spaces in the post-war context. She says, "London, no longer confident as the centre of empire, is repositioned as an alterable and even transitory space" (2009, p. 12). In the novel, when Galahad talks about the urban spaces of London, he describes how the metropolis does not allow people to know each other and how everybody is kept busy with their own matters. He says, "London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers" (Selvon, p. 70). Moses, another Trinidadian immigrant suffering from discrimination in the English space says, "They send you for a storekeeper work and they want to put you in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think that is all we good for" (Selvon, p. 48). These descriptions about London show that the migrants living in Britain have to adapt to the urban space which is unlike their life back 'home'. Thus, to further negotiate their sense of belonging, they re-territorialize themselves within an alterable Britain.

An Influx of Migrants

The question of why and how the English felt threatened by the migrant influx in the British space can also be seen through the coverage of English newspapers. The role of English newspapers in the novel shows us how the immigrant's images were portrayed. From these reports the English could understand that their English culture was now being invaded by the de-territorialization of these migrants. Thus, the creation of an alter-nation was becoming a threat to Englishness as it is. Baucom in his essay discusses the impact of televisions on the communication system during the riots that took place in England. He notes how the reports of these riots telecasted on television would have an opposite effect on the English who feared their English order of peace would be disrupted by the rioters. Baucom (1999) comments, "Televising of the riot connects not only to the possibility that the television may be a window through which the architectures of Englishness are opened to the crowd's performative disorders" (p. 192). In *Lonely Londoners* (1956), Selvon portrays the English media as an enemy of the Caribbeans as they were portrayed and judged in generalized terms. On the other hand, among the English localities, these migrant

lifestyles were seen as a threat as the building of an alter-nation might bring disorder to England.

When Tolroy goes to receive his family arriving from Jamaica, a news reporter from the *Echo* asks Tanty whether the whole family will be living in London. The reporter's questions such as "Have you any relatives here? Are you going to live in London?" (Selvon, 1956, p. 27) show that the English were anxious to know about their whereabouts even after they had been granted legal citizenship in Britain. Such discrimination can be seen clearly when the reporter adds, "I hope you don't find our weather too cold for you" (Selvon, p. 28). It shows that the English do not want the 'outsiders' to call England their 'home'. They still considered the migrants as mere "Jamaican families coming to Britain" (Selvon, p. 28) since their post-WWII temperament for their own space remained high, even in the light of the 1848 Nationality Act. Again, when Moses thinks about the confrontations of nationalities; he says, "everybody know how after the war them rich English family sending to the continent to get domestic and over there all the girls think like the newspapers say about the Jamaicans that the streets of London paved with gold so they coming by the boatload" (Selvon, pp. 98-99). This view reflects the multilayered perspectives of how England felt threatened by the thought of the emigrants invading their 'home' and on the 'other' side, the news was made out of sweeping assumptions to marginalize their de-territorialization process. In the end, Baucom's (1999) discussion on riots and media communications can also be tied to Selvon's portrayal of newspapers and migrants' lives. These forms of communication created anxiety and fear on both sides, underlining the question of belongingness in an alter-nation.

(Re)imagining How to Belong

The effects of the extension of the 1948 Nationality Act mentioned in the previous paragraphs show that some gaps were intentionally created by the British government. Baucom (1999) discusses that the Nationality Act created this gap by drawing the lines of British nationality that could only be considered legal when one had a tracing of their ancestors to be born in any one of the British lands. He asserts:

The Nationality Act defined the nation's community of belonging according to the principle of "partiality"... In effect the law thus drew the lines of the nation rather snugly around the boundaries of race and erased the present as a space available for new engendering of national identity. (p. 195)

Now in the novel, when the immigrants start coming to London, their presence in that space threatens the traditional thread of such radical results of the extension of the Nationality Act where an influx is seen to invade the much cladded 'private' spaces of Britain. For example, during one of the conversations between Moses and Galahad, Moses says that "It had a time when I was first here, when it only had a few West-Indians in London, and things used to go good enough. These days spades all over the place, and every shipload is big news, and the English people don't like the boys coming to England to work and live" (Selvon, 1956, p. 36). This particular statement implies that the English citizens very cleverly or what the English author Baucom has said 'snuggly', created a boundary around their Nationality Act where their own means was to be met through these working-class migrants but not by giving them proper legal status as the citizens of Britain. Moreover, the history of the West-Indians' contribution during the War was successfully obliterated as well from the cultural memory of Britain. Thus, in reaction, these de-territorialized migrants begin to celebrate their working-class status.

We see in the novel how some small businesses grew around British towns just to fulfill the need for these migrants' own cultural experiences in England. Food such as saltfish and rice are very popular among West Indian cuisine and small British

businessmen built their marketplaces based on this. Even the tailor shops that grew to cater to these migrants very much contributed to the English economy. As Moses says, “Shops all about start to take in stocks of foodstuffs what West Indians like... [and] by the time you ready to leave the [tailor] shop the fellas have you feeling like a lord even if you ain’t give an order for a suit and you have him down one cigar” (Selvon, 1956, p. 73). From all of these examples, we can see how much the British businessmen needed migrants to create privatized marketplaces, discarding the reality that these are the same ‘outsiders’ who helped reconstruct the post-WWII British economy.

Community Values

In *Lonely Londoners* (1956), the recurring concern of community values is portrayed a bit differently than we see in the later literature pieces on immigration such as Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) or Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000). In Selvon’s work, London is portrayed as a place where the collective sense of immigrant community is not seen in a specific place or time, rather, their collective sense of community can be seen through their use of language and in their memories of their homelands back in the West Indies. For example, although Moses experiences London for over five years, his confession of love for Trinidad remains obvious to the readers. He says, “This is a lonely miserable city... Here is not like home where you have friends all about” (Selvon, p. 125). Even though his understanding of the city of London shows it as a place where the immigrants stay and build an alternative nation for themselves, his nostalgic remarks tell the readers that the West Indies is his real ‘home’ and not in London. This is why Moses says, “Sometimes tears come to his eyes he don’t know why really, if is home-sickness or if is just that life in general beginning to get too hard” (Selvon, p. 133).

Another example of their sense of collective community in immediate post-WWII Britain is how the gatherings of immigrants in their church reveal a space where each individual shares a common thread of belongingness, in one way or another. The church is portrayed as a space “for the migrant, as for any other subjects, cultural identity can be the product as much as of what is forgotten as of what is remembered” (Selvon, 1956, p. 202). Now the question of the discourse of English language used in the novel has been debated over the years. Their language is what Achebe (1997) in his article “English and the African Writer” would call “a new form of English” (p. 10), and it challenges the “forms and deviations of the Queen’s English” (Dyer, 2002, p. 137). In the novel we see the technique of using stream of consciousness to explore the fluidity of immigrants’ thoughts on belonging with the help of their cultural references and anecdotes. This is how the standard variant of the Queen’s English is challenged in the novel:

listen to this ballad what happen to Moses one summer night one splendid summer night with the sky brilliant with stars like in the tropics he was liming in Green Park when a English fellar come up to him and say you are just the man I am looking for who me Moses say yes the man say come with me Moses went wondering what the test want and the test take him to a blonde who was standing up under a tree and talk a little so Moses couldn’t hear but Blondie shake her head then he take Moses to another one who was sitting on a bench and she say yes so the test come back to Moses and want to pay Moses to go with the woman. (Selvon, 1956, pp. 106-107)

From colonial history, we have seen the use of the colonizers’ language to dominate the ‘others’ but here in the post-WWII space of Englishness, the new form of the very same English language is a way of reminding us that these immigrants came to Britain out of de-territorialization to create their rightful space amidst the potential of an alter-nation. Fanon (1952) would call this process of de-territorialization the process of “restructuring the world” (p. 60). This is how the feeling of the collective

community in post-WWII Britain through a shared love for their homeland back in the West Indies is shown through the use of distorted Englishes or alternate forms of the Queen's language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that in *Lonely Londoners* (1956), altering the borderline definition of a nation through migrant cultures turned post-WWII Britain into a multicultural space. In the process, the native context of Englishness and its history in the making was brought into public consideration. Furthermore, the novelist's creative investigation of the relatively new concerns of belonging, alter-nations, and political identities created newer scopes for the readers to realize how complex postcolonial premises can be.

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